Castlemaine Naturalist

March 2002 Vol. 26.2 #286 FORES IN
TAGMANIA
SEE P.7

Solitary Islands Marine Park

A few kilometres offshore at Wooli are the most northerly of a group of six islands, the Solitary Islands, dotted along the coast towards Coffs Harbour. They are the site of the southernmost coral reefs along the east coast of the continent.

As we stayed there it was brought home to us just how difficult it is to make decisions on the boundaries for these areas. Recreational fishermen, professional fishermen, diving tour operators, and town business people with interest in tourism were all involved in trying to come to amicable agreement on the submissions required for their various interests.

It is now acknowledged that the numbers of fish are declining noticeably. The regular mullet run, so essential to men and birds, has been so insignificant recently as to be almost indiscernible when the season comes round. There are ominous signs out on the reefs where years ago there were huge Sailfish and Marlin, of which our landlady had impressive photographs on her walls. It is suggested that Japanese long-line fishing has upset the ecological balance over the years and that seems possible. There are only three commercial fishermen working out of Wooli, but large numbers of recreational fishermen which have increased over the years, as well as spear fishermen.

People have also become proud of their bird population, and the interest shown by regular visitors is also a consideration.

Meantime, fresh fish is available daily if you can't catch your own, and I am happy to report that the oysters from the small farm in the estuary are as succulent as ever, and that in three years the price has only risen by 50c to \$8 per dozen (opened) unless you eat at the club or hotel where the price is \$13.50 per dozen!

Shirley Parnaby

The Decline of Plants and Birds in Local Bushland.

Below is a list of some species of birds and plants that are believed to be now less common. The list has come from a variety of sources, including an analysis of Bird Atlas records for the local area, from my (with Lesley) regular 2 ha 20 minute Bird Atlas surveys (about 9-10 surveys/block per year over three years), and observations by CFNC members. This discussion refers to populations in the Castlemaine District.

Grey-crowned Babbler. A flock has been present on the Castlemaine Golf Club for many years. By early 2001 the flock had dwindled to three, and in June 2001 some reports gave the population size as one individual. None has been seen recently, and the flock is probably extinct here. I believe that this was the last known local population.

White-browed Babbler. Some estimates are that babblers are now found in about 1 in 3 of their former sites. In addition, numbers in flocks have diminished. The long tern future of this species must be problematical.

Hooded Robin. Now very uncommon. Ten years ago Hooded Robins were often recorded. I have not seen one locally for some years.

Flame Robin numbers are well down. A few years ago small or medium flocks were often seen. Flocks over the past few years have been smaller (often with 1 or 2 individuals) and have been seen less often.

Scarlet Robins are still moderately common, but have reduced in numbers over the past few years. In 1999, there were 12 sightings in our 2 ha searches, 9 in 2001 and only one in 2001, from about 65 surveys per year.

Diamond Firetail. Seen less often recently, and often singly or very small groups.

Red-browed Firetail. Numbers are down, with fewer flocks and smaller flocks.

Chestnut Rumped Hylacola. Is now rarely seen.

Crested Bellbird. Was regularly heard in Muckleford Forest. Now rarely heard...

Southern Whiteface. Now rare. I have not seen one locally for more than two years.

Willie Wagtail is still a common bird, but is seen less often. 20 years ago one would be seen every kilometre or so along a roadway. They are now spread much further apart.

Speckled Warbler is now seen much less often.

White-fronted Chat. Is now rarely seen in this district.

Swift Parrot. Less common. Fewer local records.

Many of the larger birds adapted to farmlands and urban area (e.g. ravens, Sulphur-crested Cockatoos and Long-billed Corellas, Galahs, Magpies, Red Wattlebirds and Noisy Miners) appear to be doing well and may well be increasing in numbers.

This is supported by our 2 ha searches. The number of species recorded in farmland or highly modified areas has remained stable or increased. In forest areas there has been a reduction in numbers. In a bushland block in Spring Gully, the average number of species recorded per visit has reduced from an average of 3.8 in 1999, to 2.7 in 2000 and 1.6 in 2001. In the Walmer Flora Reserve, there has been a slight increase from 4.8 species per visit in 1999 to 5.1 in 2001. In the Wattle Flat Forest the numbers have decreased from an average of 2.1 in 1999 to 1.0 in 2001.

Tree Fern. The last Tree Fern in the local Box-ironbark forest was recorded about 10 years ago. 25 years ago they were scattered along the tributaries of Forest Creek. They are probably now extinct in the Forest Creek and Barkers Creek catchments.

Shrub Violet. Some club members have seen hillsides covered with this shrub. I have not seen one locally for many years.

Beardless Beard-orchid is no longer present in its earlier locations, and I have not seen one for 12 years.

Bluebeard Caladenia. Very rare. It has disappeared from most localities.

Great Sun-orchid. Extinct? I have not seen one locally for many years.

Wattle species, Fryers Ridge. An un-named species. The population has dwindled from five to two.

Victorian Christmas Bush. Probably extinct locally. Not seen, despite searches, for some years.

Other Orchids. There are early orchids records (50+ years ago) for plants that I have not seen locally. For example, Swamp Diuris was reported to be abundant with hundreds of plants.

Silver Banksias. Two specimens were recorded during roadside surveys ten years ago. Both are now gone, and this species may no longer be present on public land. Silver Banksia were also on private property near Mt. Alexander Shire. These have also died.

Undershrubs. Many of the undershrubs appear to be much less common.

Why the decline?

Probably there are many contributing factors. Some of the possible contributing factors include.

- 1. Fire. Changes in fire frequency and intensity, and season of burning.
- 2. Rainfall. There has been series of dry years. Much of the rainfall has been in heavy showers, and the forest and subsoil have become very dry.
- 3 Grazing. Increased grazing, including grazing by wallabies. Some of the forest that now has an open structure has shrubs grazed to ground level. An enclosure on the Nuggetty Ranges (Maldon) shows dramatically the effect on species diversity and abundance when grazing is excluded.
- 4 Weed competition. Shell Grass (Quaking or Blowfly Grass) and Hair Grass (Aira spp) colonise undisturbed forest, and adversely affect the growth of lilies, orchids and other herbaceous species, and may also reduce the successful regeneration of shrubby species. There are many other weeds that adversely affect native species.
- 5 Honeybees. Introduced Honeybees compete against native animals, including native pollinators (e.g. native bees). If the native pollinators are reduced, seed production from some native plants will be affected. Extinction of a native bee may mean extinction of a plant species once the seed bank in the soil is exhausted. Wild populations of honeybees are also a problem. It is now common to see tree hollows taken over by wild bee populations, and bees often infest nesting boxes.
- 6 **Predators.** Increase in feral predators, particularly cats and foxes. Babblers, for example, are not a major food source for foxes, but there are so many foxes that only a tiny percentage need to take a bird to make a major impact on the babbler population.

Other possibilities include soil compaction, introduction of micro-organisms, pollution, loss of fertility through removal of forest products, alteration of light and micro-climate through clearing and tree felling, loss of old habitat trees, and fragmentation of bushland.

Conclusion. A casual inspection of the local forests shows that there are still an abundance of trees. It is the shrub layer and the herbaceous/ground layers that are depleted. It will be a challenge to reverse the decline.

Ern Perkins. 19 February, 2002.

Observations

- Guidford Landcare people sent a photo of a specimen of orchid found at Guildford, which was identified as the Rosy Hyacinth Orchid, *Dipodium roseum*.
- Two immature Hooded Robins were seen at Warburton Bridge, a first sighting at this area, by Margaret Badminton.

- Jenny Morton reported seeing Wire-leaf Mistletoe Amyema preisii growing on Blackwood in the west section of William Street. The usual host for this mistletoe is Cootamundra Wattle.
- Nattalie de Maccus had a Brush-tailed Phascogale fall down her chimney at Barkers Creek!
- From Ken Dredge 100 White-throated Needletails seen over Westly Hill coming in front of the storm in the first week of February. Shirley Parnaby must have seen the tail end of them as she saw half a dozen in Hunter Street. Ken also has seen a pair of Red-capped Robins in Moonlight Flat.
- Chris Morris, though a keen bird lover, is not so happy that the Musk Lorikeets are taking his, as yet, green apples. At least they are leaving the Damsons alone this year!
- Enid Chapman's place has been invaded by hundreds of small cricket like insects. She said they were similar to the usual black crickets that abound in late summer, but these were smaller and duller.
- John Cole reported that again, just after the rain, the magpies were having a great feast of flying ants when the Red Meat Ants were taking off on their nuptial flight.
- The Golf Course Bird List from Debbie Worland for Dec/Jan reads Red-kneed Dotterel, Brown-headed and Yellow-Tufted Honeyeaters, Dusky Reed-warblers, Little Australasian Grebes (breeding), White-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes, Hardheads, 4 Latham Snipe, Yellow-billed Spoonbill, Eastern Yellow Robins with young, 12 Great Black Cormorants, Pelicans, White-throated Needletails, 2 Wedgetailed Eagles, Australian Crake, Yellow-rumped Thornbills and approximately 150 Long-billed Corellas.
- She also reported a pair of Caspian Terns and Silver Gulls at Lauriston Reservoir and, at the Quince Tree on 4/2, Rainbow Bee-eaters and a small animal a little bigger than a mouse hopping along on the side of the road, but she was unable to identify it.
- Stan Bruton told us that Berris Perry, who has raised a number of native animals when they have been orphaned, had one of her Kangaroos join her and the dogs as she walked in the bush recently. It is quite some years since the animal returned to the wild and joined the local mob.
- Penny Garnett was unable to attend the meeting but sent word that she and Tom had been out to the Red, White and Blue mine and found that the Blow Mine Track is being widened and several quite large Ironbarks had been victims of the roadworks. She questioned whether perhaps this is being done for the convenience of tourist busses? Does anyone know?
- Singletons woke to an awful noise outside the house in mid-February, and discovered a Koala there in the morning. It disappeared later and hasn't returned.
- Scores of Magpies were seen in Koala Park on the east side on 23/2. Maggie Oliver and Rita Mills.

- ZOe Thomas discovered a dead rat-like creature at her place. A search through several reference books couldn't bring about an identification, but it is the same as a colony in Blackjack Road.
- Ern and Lesley Perkins have had a Boobook Owl in their garden in 27 Doveton Street. They had heard it on several occasions prior to the sightings.
- Margaret Badminton was called on to identify a small owl found peering out of a neighbours' slow combustion heater. They'd removed it to cage, and when Margaret arrived she was delighted to find a half grown Owlet Nightjar staring solemnly at her.
- Another observation from Gilbert Smith "I would like to report a fantastic observation I had at my Colles Rd. block on 6/1/02. It was a very hot afternoon about 3pm, and I was walking along my fence line when two Sugar Gliders flew across Colles Road from my property to my neighbours', landing on a tree trunk and then disappearing up into the tree tops. I've seen Sugar Gliders before on my property I had at least three in a nesting box up near by dam, but this is the first time (I've seen them) in the middle of the day. Is this behaviour common for Sugar Gliders?" (We'd love some feed back on this one. Ed.)

Gower School Birds, 12/12/01

15.50 to 17.20 on a warm to hot afternoon with light but variable wind.

Bird

Fairy Martin

White-browed Babbler

Red-rumped Parrot

Willie Wagtail

Brown Treecreeper

Eastern Rosella

Yellow-tufted Honeyeater

Magpie

Yellow Robin

Superb Fairy Wren

Grey Shrike-thrush

Restless Flycatcher

White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike

Diamond Firetail
Fuscous Honeyeater
Dusky Woodswallow
Crested Bellbird

Comments

Overhead

2 separate small groups of 2 and 3

birds

Several noisy pairs and groups

1

Several individuals

Group of 4

Heard more often than seen

3 birds together

1

1 male with vocal family group

1

3 birds together in the school

enclosure

2 birds: 1 adult feeding a young bird

with insects

1 immature bird

Numerous and vocal

Only 1 definite sighting

Heard only

Philip West

February at 67 Hunter Street

(or, The Tale of a Goshawk!)

Occasionally in the early mornings recently a Brown Goshawk has appeared perched in the tall Peppermint Eucalypt or pursuing small flocks of Musk Lorikeets around our area.

At the same time we have suddenly realized our unwelcome plague of sparrows has disappeared, and has still not returned after a week or so. The other small birds, honeyeaters, thornbills, silvereyes etc. emerge on the departure of the goshawk. Hopefully the sparrows have been eaten.

A goshawk has also been observed at Andrew Street, possibly the same bird, and a pathetic bundle of colourful lorikeet feathers was found in a garden. We hope it will continue to concentrate on the sparrows.

Shirley Parnaby.

FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING, 28/2/02

A letter was received from the President of the Alice Springs FNC (which is a member of the national network of FNCs) concerning a small number of foxes which have become established in Tasmania. This is of great concern, because, up 'til recently, Tasmania has been free of foxes, and if numbers continue to build up it will be a disaster for many ground dwelling animals and birds in particular and Tasmania has a number of endemic species which could be under threat.

The text of the letter reads

"TASMANIAN FOXES

"It is with grave concern that I have learnt of the existence of a small recently established fox population in Tasmania.

"The Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife web page contains the following information.

"Latest news

Recent sightings of foxes in the State have heightened fears that the fox may become established in Tasmania. Sightings have ranged from Bellingham, the Longford and Powranna areas and a recent sighting (Friday 18 January 2002) in the Somerset area of a fox and two cubs.

"It is estimated that 12 - 19 foxes may be established in the State,. With the end of the breeding season, cubs would now be expected to be in the company of the vixen (female) before dispersing out on their own in April/May."

"This is a disaster of national importance. If foxes become established in Tasmania inevitably many species will be pushed to the edge of extinction. To eliminate foxes the Tasmanian Government needs Commonwealth assistance immediately. It is no good budgeting for it the next financial year. After they have bred in July it may be too late." "Whatever it costs to get rid of these foxes now will be far cheaper than the long-term cost in intervening

to save the species that may become endangered if the foxes become established.

"Please, if you value Australia's wildlife write to the Commonwealth Minister for Environment and to your Commonwealth MP and let them know how you feel. The Commonwealth is only likely to put up the money if politicians get thousands of letters on the issue in their mail boxes and suspect that there might be a few votes in it.

"Yours faithfully

"Robert Reed" and his address and e-mail address are given.

He adds "The writer is the President of the Alice Springs Field Naturalists' Club, but has picked this up as a concerned individual who has decided to make an attempt to stop the coming disaster instead of sitting wringing his hands. When I have got through this mailing list I will put further information on foxes on my website at http://www.octa4.net.au/alicenats/ "(A suggested circular letter will be available at the March meeting, but it is always far more effective to put your informed thoughts in your own words.)

The next scheduled Roadside Cleanup will be held on Sat. April 13 at 8.30am. Wear sturdy footwear, hat and sunscreen. If plenty of people turn up the cleanup will only take an hour. Safety jackets, gloves and rubbish bags are provided. Grocery bags are handy to have with you though as they are easier to handle and can be put into the rubbish bag. Note - we are not permitted to do the cleanup in rain, fog, or on a total fire ban day.

Pimelea spinescens. The Guildford Landcare Group went out with Ern Perkins and were shown where the plants are on the roadside. They are going to tag the plants and begin a program of weeding.

Your help is needed. The Club has been funded to produce a booklet on the Weeds of the Mount Alexander Shire, illustrated by photographs. If you have any photographs of weeds Ern Perkins would like to hear from you.

Community River Health Forums. Information from the North Central Catchment Management Authority -

It has recently benchmarked the condition of the region's major rivers and tributaries, which shows that there is still a long way to go to attain ecological sustainability.

The benchmarking has been undertaken to assist in the development of River-health plans for the Campaspe, Loddon, Avoca and Avon-Richardson catchments, which will identify ways to rehabilitate the regions waterways. A 10 year works program is envisaged, but they state that it can only be achieved in partnership with the community.

A total of 18 community forums will be held across the region, and the Castlemaine forum will be held in the Campbells Creek Community Centre at 7 pm on Tuesday April 9.

They want information about local values and local threats to waterways in our area, and are asking all to come to the nearest community forum. They will discuss the history of waterway management, the present approach and how to determine future directions. They are specifically interested in our input into the following:

- Current condition of waterways in the local area:
- · values of waterways in the local area; and
- threats to the same.

If you would like further information contact Tania West on 5440 1859.

Threatened Species Network. The next meeting of the steering committee is on Mar. 7 at 9.30am in the Shire offices. The Club has done some seed collection, and have offered to take part in surveys.

The first of the surveys will be at the Kalimna enclosure for the Eltham Copper Butterfly, which is fenced. It is on the opposite side of the Tourist road from Kalimna Point.

The date and time - Monday Mar 18 at 9am. Meet at the Kalimna Point entrance on the Tourist Road.

The proposal is that we do 10 or 15 metre quadrats in pairs, some of the quadrats being in the fenced area and some adjacent to it so there can be a comparison. We would need to find what species are in each quadrat, and the number of each species. It will be a long term project with monitoring continuing over some years.

Provisional arrangements for a Taradale survey of flora and fauna on Pauline and George Reed's property are - Meet at 27 Doveton St. at 8.30am on sat. April 6, BUT FIRST contact Ern Perkins on 5472 4553. Possibly more information at the March meeting.

Later in the year a survey of Meins Lane and the Muckleford -Yapeen Road will need to be done on foot.

Margaret Badminton is looking for expressions of interest in a Club Safari to the new Birds Australia acquisition, Newhaven Station, in Northern Territory. There will be a sheet available at the meeting. There is to be camping only on Newhaven, but the roads are OK for two wheel drive vehicles - as long as it doesn't rain! The two dates submitted for consideration are August 2002 or July 2003.

A new monthly Bird Watching Excursion is planned in conjunction with U3A, under the leadership of Nigel Harland. It has been put to U3A and several members are interested in taking part. It has been decided to hold the excursions on the 4th Thursday of each month, meeting to the Octopus (the old Tourist Information building opposite Castle Motel) at 8.30 am. Nigel

will lead the first one, and then members of both groups will be asked to take turns to lead.

Note that subscriptions are due in February. If you have paid there will be a (p) after your name on the envelope, if not paid there will be a (-).

Change in the Committee We are losing John Turnbull, Maureen Dredge and Brenda Envall, and the Club thanks them for their time and commitment. This year we welcome Margaret Badminton, Geraldine Harris, Hans van Gemert - who has plunged in at the deep end as Treasurer - and Richard Piesse on to the Committee. Margaret returns after a break.

Also the Club extends a welcome to new members Miky Kudo and Gill King.

PLANTS OF THE MOUNT ALEXANDER SHIRE

Wiry Buttons, Leptorhyncos tenuifolius

Flowering - Nov. - Jan.

When there is little else in flower these attractive little yellow buttons on their fine stems seem to cheer the

their fine stems seem to cheer the summer bush a little.

The plant grows to about 15 cm high. The leaves are narrow linear with revolute (slightly curled) margins, the upper surface is green and the under-surface woolly white.

The bracts of the involucre are woolly and fringed with brown points. The male flowers have 5 - 7 pappus bristles while they are usually lacking on the female flowers. A good hand lens or stereo microscope is really needed for definite identification from Scaly Buttons L. squamatus, which usually start flowering a bit earlier, but coincides at the early flowering time of Wiry Buttons, but the leaves of Wiry Buttons are narrower. The peduncles of Scaly Buttons are scaly and the involucre bracts fringed and pointed. The bisexual flowers have



8-12 pappus bristles and 4 -6 in males.

Rita Mills

Plant Rescue Program

Every now and then I get a snippet of information from a friend in Western Australia telling of some of Western Power's (one of the West's Electricity suppliers) Endangered Plant Rescue Programme.

Although this was sent to me some time ago, I feel it is still of great interest.

Western Power (to quote their newsletter) has recognised the plight of WA's endangered plants. In 1995 it commenced support for a significant research program to be undertaken by Kings Park and Botanic Garden to rescue fourteen of the state's most critically endangered plants. Ten plants from the Perth metropolitan area include six orchids, two wetland plants and two shrubs. Four endangered eucalypts in the program come from country locations

The Rescue Programme, which includes a research scholarship, incorporates the identification, research and management of remnant plant populations. A critical part of the program is the re-introduction of these rare plants to secure sites.

The sheet gives a summary of what they are doing to achieve their aims. The orchids involved include the Cinnamon Sunorchid *Thelymitra dedmaniarum*, which was mentioned in an earlier CN, the Swamp Donkey Orchid *Diurus micrantha*, and the Glossy-leaved Hammer Orchid *Drakea elastica*. One of the shrubs is the Summer Honeypot, *dryandra mimica* and the eucalypts are all mallees

One of the most interesting is a specimen found near Busselton of the Meelup Mallee *E. phylactus*, which is thought to be 6300 years old. Scientists have extracted DNA samples from the tree. Efforts have been made to conserve the plant by using the latest in tissue culture technology for cloning. The first successful tissue cultures have been obtained and researchers are attempting to regenerate whole plants as well as freezing samples in liquid nitrogen to ensure that long term protection of the species.

Scientists originally thought the tree was a collection of individual plants but discovered they were looking at 77 stems of the same plant, growing in an area nearly 30m in diameter.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to learn that our electricity company was interested in doing something similar for Victorian plants?

Rita Mills

CASTLEMAINE NATURALIST, March 2002 PROGRAM

General Meetings are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) hall, at 8.00pm on the second Friday of each month, except January.

Excursions leave promptly at times stated, usually on the Saturday after the general meeting. There are NO excursions on TOTAL FIRE BAN days. Also note that outdoor events are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions.

Business Meetings are held at 27 Doveton Street on the 4th Thursday of each month, except December, at 7.30pm. All members are invited to attend.

VISITORS ARE ALWAYS WELCOME TO CLUB MEETINGS AND EXCURSIONS

Fri. Mar 8 Nicaragua with Neil Norris. 8pm UCA hall.

Sat. Mar 9 Mount Alexander. Birdwatching in Koala Park with Maggie Oliver. If you prefer not to walk, the area near the entrance is a very pleasant spot to stay and birdwatch - or try to spot a Koala. Take binocs and afternoon tea.

Mon. Mar. 18 Kalimna survey. Meet at 9am, Point entrance. details p 9.

Sat. April 6. (provisional) Morning survey at Taradale. Leave 8.30 am. See p.9

Tue. April 9 Community River Health Forum (NCCMA) Campbells Creek Community Centre, 7pm. See pp 8 and 9

Fri. April 12 - Freeway Focus. Frank Panter is the speaker. UCA hall at 8pm.

Sat April 12. Highway Cleanup. Meet at Taits' Carriages at 8.30 am. Details, see p 8 Sat. Apr. 13. Sutton Grange. Jock McRae's property. Leave CHIRP at 1.30pm or meet at Dainty Lane, Sutton Grange, at 2pm. There will be an inspection of the plantings, followed by afternoon tea (BYO). An optional walk afterwards to Jock's wetland, which will involve a 20 minute walk through the paddocks.

Thurs. April 26. Birdwatching. Start of joint program with U3A. Details, see p 9 Fri. May 10 Bats. the speaker is Lindy Lumsden of DNRE. UCA hall at 8pm.

Sat. May 11. Ted Errey Walk, Brisbane Ranges. All day excursion. The walk is approx. 10 kms, but there's plenty to do if you don't want to walk. Take morning and afternoon tea, lunch, sturdy footwear and clothing. Leave 27 Doveton St. at 9am.

Fri. June 8 Fungi, Mosses and Liverworts, with Bruce Fuhrer, well known photographer/naturalist and author and David Maher, mycologist. UCA hall at 8pm. Sat. June 9 Fungi excursion to Bullarto Res. or Moody property, depending on the availability of fungi. Leave Chirp, Mostyn at 1.30pm.

Fri. July 12 Reptiles. The speaker is Darren Green of Bendigo. UCA hall, 8pm

Sat July 13, Moody Property or Fungi at Bullarto Res. - see June 9.

Disclaimer - The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributor and not necessarily those of the club.

2002 Committee E. Perkins (President) ph 5472 3124, C. Morris (V.P. and Grievance Officer), G. Broadway (Sec.). ph. 5472 2513, H. van Gemert (treas.), R. Mills (N/L Ed. and P.O.), M. Badminton, G. Harris, B. Maund, M. Oliver, R. Piesse.

Subscriptions for 2002 Ordinary Membership: Single ,\$22 Family, \$30 Pensioner or student: Single \$19 Family \$24 Supporting: \$31

The subscription also covers postage of the 'Castlemaine Naturalist'.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club, P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine. 3450. Incorporation # A0003010B